

Looking in the Past for a Discourse of Motherhood: Birgitta of Sweden and Julia Kristeva

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IN 1975, JULIA KRISTEVA, the Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst, sociologist, and feminist, was pregnant.¹ She was also writing, and the essays from the years surrounding the birth of her son in 1976 reflect a deep concern for maternity and its relationship to female sexuality and feminism. In one of her most provocative essays, which first appeared as the article “Hérétique de l’amour” in 1977 in the periodical *Tel Quel* (Winter 1977) and later as a chapter titled “Stabat Mater” in her book *Histoires de l’amour* in 1983, Kristeva delves into the history of the cult of the Virgin, engaging with the early Christian and medieval Marian tradition by means of Marina Warner’s influential book, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976). As critic Toril Moi explains in her *Kristeva Reader*, where this essay is reprinted, Kristeva’s main concern is “to point out that today, due to the demise of the cult of the Virgin, and of religion in general, we are left without a satisfactory discourse on motherhood.”² But Kristeva does something unusual in this essay: she intersperses stream-of-consciousness, intimately personal observations of her own experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. This inner narrative is set off typographically from the main critical narrative (fig. 1). Neither narrative acknowledges the other, leaving it to the reader to deduce the meaning of this startling juxtaposition of individual story and Christian history.

Six hundred years earlier, another female author was also writing in search of a discourse of motherhood, also struggling to incorporate an inner narrative within a larger critical narrative. St. Birgitta of Sweden, born in 1303, married and had eight children before receiving a calling vision in which God stated her role as “bride and channel” of Christ.³

HÉRÉTIQUE DE L'AMOUR

« Ils cherchaient l'un et l'autre la pauvreté dans le langage. Sur ce point, ils s'accordaient. Toujours, pour elle, il y avait trop de mots et un mot de trop, de plus des mots trop riches et qui parlaient avec excès. Bien sûr, elle était pauvre, mais elle ne voulait pas l'être. Elle voulait toujours préférer les mots abstraites, qui n'évoquaient rien. Est-ce qu'elle n'essayait pas, et lui avec elle, de se former au sein de cette histoire un abri pour se protéger de quelque chose que l'histoire aussi contribue à nuire ? Il y avait des moments où il le croyait et des moments où il le refusait. »

Maurice Blanchot, *L'Attente l'oubli*, p. 19.

Figure 1. Excerpt from Julia Kristeva, "Hérétique de l'amour," *Tel Quel* (Winter, 1977), 30-49 (p. 30-31).

vision, d'un frisson, d'un embryon encore informe, innommable. Épiphanies. Photos de ce qui n'est pas encore visible et que le langage forcément survole de très haut, allusivement. Mots toujours trop lointains, trop abstraits pour ce grouillement souterrain de secondes qui se plient en espaces inimaginables. Les écrits est une épreuve du discours, comme l'est l'amour. Qu'est-ce aimer, pour une femme ? La même chose qu'écrire. Rire. Impossible. Flash sur l'innommable, tissu d'abstractions à déchirer, qu'un corps s'aventure enfin hors de son abri, s'y risque en sens sous voile de mots. VERBE. FLESH. De l'un à l'autre, éternellement, visions mortelles, métaphores de l'invisible.

Le paradoxe : mère ou narcissisme primaire ?

Si d'une femme il ne peut pas être dit ce qu'elle est (au risque d'abolir sa différence), peut-être en serait-il autrement de la mère puisque c'est la seule fonction de l'« autre sexe » à laquelle un sujet parlant peut attribuer, à coup sûr, de l'existence ? Pourtant, là aussi, nous sommes pris dans un paradoxe. — D'abord, nous vivons dans une civilisation où la représentation *concrète* (religieuse ou laïque) de la féminité est résorbée dans la maternité. Pourtant, si l'on y regarde de près, cette maternité est le fantasme que nourrit l'adulte, homme ou femme, d'un continent perdu : moins une mère archaïque idéalisée, qu'une idéalisée de la *relation* qui nous lie à elle, illicite, illicite — idéalisée du narcissisme primaire. Or, lorsque le féminisme revendique une nouvelle représentation de la féminité, il semble identifier la maternité avec cette méprise idéalisée et, parce qu'il refuse l'image et ses abus, contourné l'expérience réelle qu'elle occulte. Résultat ? — Dénégation ou rejet de la maternité par certains secteurs avant-gardistes du féminisme. Ou bien, acception — consciente ou non — de ses représentations traditionnelles par les « larges masses » de femmes et d'hommes.

Le christianisme est sans doute la construction symbolique la plus raffinée dans laquelle la féminité, pour autant qu'elle y transparaît — et elle y transparaît

souvent — se réserve dans le *Maternel*¹. Appelons du « maternel » le principe ambivalent qui tient d'une part de l'espèce, de l'autre — d'une catastrophe d'identité qui borde de Nom propre par cette altérité innommable qu'on imagine comme de la féminité, du non-langage ou de la psychose. Ainsi, le Christ, ce Fils de l'homme, n'est tout compte fait, « humain » que par sa mère : comme si l'humanisme chrétien ou chrétien ne pouvait être qu'un maternalisme (c'est d'ailleurs ce que certains courants laïcistes dans son orbite n'arrêtent pas de revendiquer par leur ésotérisme). Pourtant, l'humanité de la Vierge mère n'est pas toujours évidente, et nous verrons comment, par sa soustraction au péché par exemple, elle se distingue du genre humain. Mais, parallèlement, la révélation la plus intense de Dieu, la mystique, ne se donne qu'à celui qui s'assume « maternel ». Saint Augustin, saint Bernard, Maître Eckhart, pour ne citer que quelques-uns, se mirent dans le rôle de vierges épouses du Père quand ils ne reçoivent pas, tel saint Bernard, directement sur les lèvres les gouttes du lait virginal. L'aisance avec le continent maternel devient alors le socle sur lequel s'érige l'amour de Dieu, de sorte que ces « Schrebers heureux » (Sollers) éclairent d'une lueur bizarre la plate psychotique de la modernité comme étant une incapacité des codes modernes d'apprivoiser le maternel, c'est-à-dire le narcissisme primaire. Rares et « littéraires », mais toujours quelque peu orientaux sinon tragiques, sont leurs répliques aujourd'hui : Henry Miller qui se dit encoint, Artaud qui s'imaginer comme « ses filles » ou « sa mère », etc. C'est la branche orthodoxe du christianisme, par la bouche d'or de Jean Chrystostome entre autres, qui va consacrer cette fonction transitionnelle du Maternel, en disant la Vierge « lien », « milieu » ou « intervalle » et en ouvrant ainsi la porte à ses identifications plus ou moins hérétiques avec le Saint-Esprit.

Cette résorption de la féminité dans le Maternel, résorption propre à de nombreuses civilisations mais que le christianisme conduit, à sa façon, à l'apogée, serait-elle simplement l'appropriation masculine du Maternel lequel, selon une hypothèse, n'est donc que le narcissisme primaire ? Ou bien, ne pourrait-on y voir, plus profondément, le mécanisme de l'énigmatique sublimation ? Mécanisme de la sublimation masculine, peut-être, mais sublimation néanmoins, s'il est vrai que pour Freud imaginaient Léonard et même

1. On lira, dans les lacunes de cet article, Marina Warner, *Alone off all her race, The Myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1976), et The Baronde, *Le Maternel inquiet* (Aubier-Montaigne, 1977), qui inspirent ces réflexions.

Over the next forty years Birgitta experienced hundreds of visions which she and her confessors recorded in her *Liber Celestis Revelationes*, a text popular throughout late medieval Europe. Her cult was particularly strong in England, where the *Revelationes* were translated into Middle English and influenced generations of holy women. In some of her book's most provocative passages, Birgitta hears from the Virgin Mary herself how the event of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), the moment of the conception of Christ, offered unique access to divine truth much like the access offered by the divine vision. Ultimately Birgitta herself experiences a "mystical pregnancy" which the Virgin must help her understand as the irrefutable proof of her prophetic vocation.

This essay explores two parallel trajectories of mythic retrospection: medieval "myths" of the Biblical past (like Birgitta's prophetic visions), and modern "myths" of the medieval past (like Kristeva's survey). Both trajectories have as their common destination a paradoxically historical and yet legendary figure: the Virgin Mary. I will examine how Birgitta, not alone among medieval female visionaries, appropriates and manipulates the figure of the Virgin Mary in an effort to discover a discourse of motherhood that accommodates female authorship. The scene of the Annunciation provides a key locus for this appropriation. Mary, book in hand, is interrupted at her reading by Gabriel; she accepts her role as the Mother of God and becomes the human vessel of the Word made flesh. Mary's literate prayer at the Incarnation provided medieval women with a model of reading, devotion, and vision remarkably adaptable to the individual writer's needs. Not only did mothers look to Mary in their search for a model of female authority, but also women without children (virgins, widows, celibates) imagined themselves as reenacting Mary's (pro)creation by creating a text: did these acts of self-definition through an *imitatio Mariae* actually serve to redefine, or even originate, a new image of Mary as an "author-mother" (or "mother-author")?

To highlight the profound innovation of such a discourse of mother-authorship, I will put this fourteenth-century saint in dialogue with a living theorist.⁴ I will not just "read" Birgitta using Kristeva, but read Kristeva using Birgitta, to see how each can illuminate the other's desire to find in the past what her present lacks. How and why does the Virgin Mary escape ancient history to become a lively, enigmatic presence for

both these women? Kristeva invites this kind of comparison between herself and a medieval author by reaching back to the Middle Ages in her essay “Stabat Mater” and later works, although it is not necessary to claim she read Birgitta specifically.⁵ By analyzing Kristeva and Birgitta side-by-side, we can see how they share a common struggle, as female authors, to negotiate their private maternity with their public narrative production—as well as their public pregnancy and private publication. This analysis yields a productive critical leap, one that neither author explicitly claims, but is vital to their positions: that the discourse of motherhood aligns with a discourse of authorship, of the inscribed voice of the mother; that the conception and birth of a child offer a paradigm—indeed a “birthright”—for the conception and birth of a text. The key to this argument is the Annunciation: the iconic underpinning of the history of literate motherhood in the West.

BIRGITTA’S corpus includes over seven hundred revelations. In them Christ as holy spouse is the central figure, while in at least a third, Mary acts as Birgitta’s instructor, intercessor, and guide. The visions frequently depict a vivid *imitatio Mariae* wherein the Virgin’s reception of the Incarnation functions as the primary model for Birgitta’s own reception of the visionary gift. In one of the first revelations in the *Revelationes*, Mary describes the moment when Gabriel visited her (bk. 1, ch. 10). Mary’s account does not rewrite the past or contradict Luke’s Gospel; in fact, she quotes it directly in several places, reinforcing the authority of the biblical story. What the vision offers is a supplement to scripture: an expansion detailing a first-person, introspective commentary angled to provide an authorizing model for Birgitta as mystic and prophet. The repeated emphasis on Mary’s unworthiness, culminating in the perfect alignment of her will with God’s, demonstrates the ideal state for spiritually conceiving the Son in the heart or soul.

The deeper significance of the Annunciation for Birgitta only becomes apparent several books later, when Mary again recalls the Incarnation event as she advises Birgitta about how she should proceed concerning a priest lying about his sins. Here we can see that Birgitta also understood Mary’s incarnation of Christ as the moment when she was filled with the wisdom of God and given the gift of prophecy of

the present, that is, knowledge about things that are otherwise secret.⁶ Mary explains to Birgitta about God's love:

In the fervor of his love he sent me his messenger and gave me to understand his decision that I should become the Mother of God. When I understood what the will of God was, then, through the fire of love that I bore in my heart towards God, a word of true obedience at once left my lips, and I gave this answer to the messenger, saying: 'May it be done according to your word.' At that very instant the Word was made flesh in me. The Son of God became my son. The two of us had one son who is both God and man, as I am both Mother and Virgin. As my Son Jesus Christ, true God and wisest of men, lay in my womb, I received such great wisdom through him that I not only could understand the learning of scholars, I could even discern whether their hearts were true, whether their words proceeded from love for God or from mere scholarly cleverness. . . . I am she who heard the truth from the lips of Gabriel and believed without doubting. This is why Truth took for himself flesh and blood from my body and remained in me. I gave birth to that same Truth who was in himself both God and man. Inasmuch as Truth, who is the Son of God, willed to come to me and to dwell in me and to be born from me, I know fully well whether people have truth on their lips or not. (3.8, 5-7, 15-16)⁷

The "word" Mary utters at the Annunciation ("May it be done according to your word") aligns with both the divine Word, the *logos* (λόγος) or *verbum* of John 1:14 (*et verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"), and the "words" of the scholars. Physical conception of the Word of God grants Mary immediate access to the scholastic realm of letters, texts, and books, otherwise generally closed to women. Her "special power" to discern truth, essentially an act of interpretation, springs directly from the divine and is funneled through Birgitta, who becomes exempt from the rigid training and requirements that make "scholars" out of men. Mary as mediatrix not only mediates between God and man but also between man's word and his intent, although the most intriguing interpretive act

is her ability to distinguish between God's truth as mediated by language (by the book) and the unmediated truth direct from God: "whether their words proceeded from love for God or from mere scholarly cleverness."

Birgitta would have understood Mary as ideally positioned between a book and God's charity. Like any late medieval Christian, Birgitta would have been intimately familiar with the Annunciation iconography of Mary holding a book. As she was greeted by the angel with the news of her conception of Christ, Mary was traditionally imagined as reading the Old Testament prophecy of the Incarnation, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14). The theology behind the iconography was that as Mary read the Word of God, Christ came alive in her womb.⁸ Her consent enabled the Word to be made flesh, as in John 1:14: *et verbum caro factum est*. From the mid-eleventh century on, commentators capitalized on this convention, riffing on such an elegant Incarnational metaphor. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) addresses the Virgin in one of his immensely popular sermons: *Responde verbum, et suscipe Verbum: profer tuum, et concipe divinum* ("Respond with a word and receive the Word: give yours and conceive God's").⁹

The image of Mary's book, so deeply imbedded in Western culture, could be understood as an iconographical shadow of almost any representation of medieval women reading and writing. Yet with a visionary author like Birgitta, the pictorial parallels are no longer generic but particular, powerful evocations of the iconography of the Incarnation. I place a fairly traditional late-fourteenth century Italian polyptych of the Annunciation (fig. 2) next to a contemporary Italian illumination of Birgitta receiving revelations (fig. 3), and the striking similarities underscore the central importance of the Annunciation scene for understanding Birgitta's prophetic vocation. Both have rays of light, symbolizing the Holy Spirit (the dove), shooting down from the hand of Jesus (from the hand of Mary, too, in Birgitta's image) to the earthly recipient of the divine message. Both women hold a book in their lap with their left hands; Birgitta's right hand actively welcomes the divine, while Mary's rests on her heart. Birgitta's desk with writing utensils carefully laid out replaces the book-laden prie-dieu often stationed in front of the Virgin (here a background bench with more books). Birgitta and Mary sit alone, faced only by an angel, while crowds of saints and the heavenly

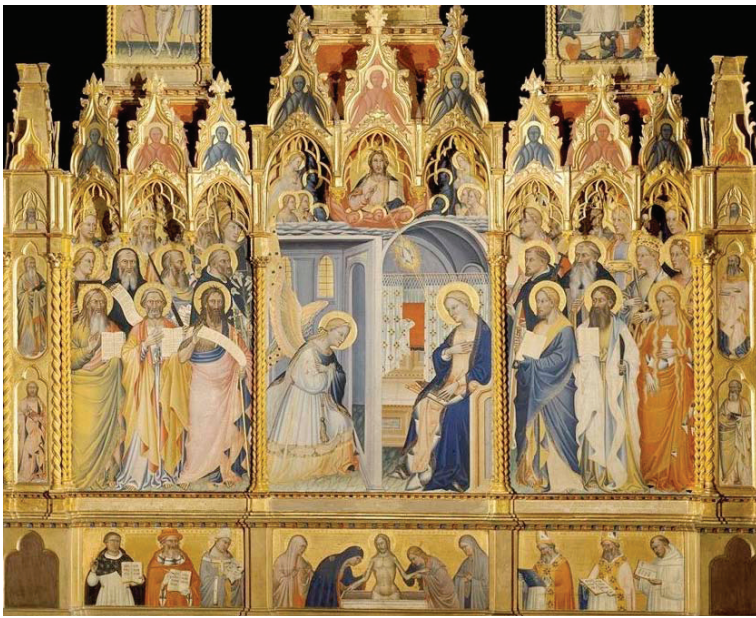


Figure 2, above. Giovanni del Biondo, *Polyptych of the Annunciation*. Italy, late fourteenth century. Accademia del cemento, Florence, Italy. Photographic credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York.



Figure 3, left. *Birgitta receives inspired revelations*. Frontispiece to Book 1 of Birgitta's *Revelations*, MS M. 498, f. 4v. Italy, late fourteenth century. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Photographic credit: The Pierpont Morgan Library.

host surround them, observing at a distance: the women's interaction with the divine is a private one with immense public consequence. The profound consequence of the Incarnation is the risen Christ, represented in both works as secondary scenes: in the polyptych in the bottom panel, the women bow to Jesus raised from the tomb; in the illumination, on the left a priest raises the Host in a celebration of the Eucharist, on which appears the infant Christ loosed from heaven on a breath of fire.

The small body of Christ held aloft, both God and man, both baby and bread, unfurls a word-scroll from his hand. Like Birgitta's book, it holds no words but rather signals the metaphorical embodiment of God *in verbo*. The hovering angel's outstretched arms clarify for the viewer the equivalence between the two scenes. Birgitta felt this correspondence viscerally. Book 6 of the *Revelationes* relates her remarkable experience of mystical pregnancy, worth quoting in full:

On the eve of the birth of the Lord such a miraculous and great exultation of the heart happened to the bride of Christ, so that she was barely able to hold herself together because of the happiness, and in that same moment she felt in her heart sensible and wonderful movement, as if in her heart were a living boy turning himself around and around. While this motion continued, she showed it to her spiritual father and her other spiritual friends, lest perhaps it was an illusion. Who, testing the truth with sight and touch, were amazed. And so therefore on that same day in the highest mass appeared the mother of God and said to the spouse: "Daughter, you wonder at this motion that you feel in your heart. You ought to know that this is not an illusion, but a manifestation of something similar to the sweetness and compassion given to me. For just as you are ignorant of the way exultation and the motion of the heart came to you so suddenly, thus the coming into me of my son was wondrous and sudden. For when I consented to the angel who announced the conception of the son of God, immediately I sensed in me something wondrous and living. And when he was born from me, he came forth from my closed maiden womb with unutterable exultation and miraculous quickness. Thus, daughter, do not fear an illusion but be thankful, for this movement you feel

is a sign of my son's coming into your heart. As my son assigns to you the name of his new bride, so I call you my daughter-in-law. . . . We wish to show our friends and the world our will through you. Truly that motion of your heart will stay with you and will equally increase the capacity of your heart." (6.88: 1-8)¹⁰

At the time of the liturgical celebration of Christ's birth, Birgitta becomes literally impregnated with the spiritual in a modeling of Mary's maternity. This impregnation corporally manifests itself as if a living child were moving "in her heart" with "unutterable exaltation."¹¹ In an echo of Luke's Annunciation scene, Mary then appears to her to announce the parallel between Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy and the Virgin's physical pregnancy with the Son of God. Now the Mother of God arrives as the messenger instead of Gabriel, echoing his *Ne timeas* of Luke 1:29. She passes on a kind of holy women's lore of mystical pregnancy, becoming a mother to a mother, both bearing the same Son. Mary interprets, or "reads," Birgitta's impregnation as a "sign" of her son's coming. Just as the Virgin became pregnant with the Word made flesh, so Birgitta finds herself pregnant not with a child but with the Word of God, with Christ present in her visions and speaking again to the world.

Mystical pregnancy such as this was not unusual in the later Middle Ages, but Birgitta's experience stands out as exceptional for several reasons.¹² Not only is it unlikely she was aware of or heavily influenced by other visionaries' similar experiences, she stood out from them as a mother among female virgins or celibate men. Also unusual: the meaning of her mystical pregnancy was explained to her by Mary herself, the figure of imitation. Most importantly, the pregnancy physically manifested Birgitta's prophetic voice, authenticating her words through a bodily sign—a meaning unique to this saint.

Several critics have attempted to situate this unusual episode within the context of Birgitta's prophetic vocation.¹³ Most notably among them, Claire Sahlin, in her book *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, considers at length the phenomenon of the mystical pregnancy and its function in Birgitta's life, arguing that Birgitta does intend to claim that she truly somatically experienced the stirring feeling of a child

(it was not simply metaphorical or “felt” within a vision) and that she considered this as a physical correlation to her visionary incarnation of Christ. Birgitta, of course, was well acquainted with pregnancy, having had eight children, although when she received this vision she had been widowed and celibate for several decades. Sahlin convincingly argues that Birgitta was not at all expressing a “longing to return to the time when she gave birth to her physical children” as presumed by some critics, but rather that she “felt authorized through the maternal role to serve as an outspoken prophet and vehicle of divine revelation.”¹⁴ Mary’s comforting words to Birgitta at the time of the mystical pregnancy validate the maternal role of outspoken prophet, which, I would add to Sahlin’s argument, also extends to the maternal role of author—of textual creator. Just as the result of Mary’s conception of God’s Word is the body of the living Christ, so the result of Birgitta’s channeling of God’s word is the body of written *Revelationes*.¹⁵ Writing offers embodiment to her transitory visionary experiences. This is what Mary commands: “We wish to show our friends and the world our will through you.” Birgitta will fulfill Mary’s command not just by passively receiving the revelations, but by actively translating them into texts to be shown to friends of Christ and Mary: fellow readers. Birgitta’s progeny are now prophecies; her children are her books; her incarnate Christ is captured on the page for all the world to read.

KRISTEVA’S writings reveal a lifelong concern with Mary. Over years of exploring the maternal, the feminine, the sacred, and the semiotic in her work in literature, linguistics, and psychoanalysis, she circles back again and again to questions first raised in her 1977 essay concerning the cult of the Virgin.¹⁶ It opens with Kristeva’s frustration with the limitations placed on the idea of motherhood by modern feminism. She laments that while for our modern civilization the representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood, motherhood in turn is absorbed by a fantasy of an idealized relationship with the mother—an idealization of primary narcissism—not really about the mother at all, but the son, the phallus. As she explains, “when feminism demands a new representation of femininity, it seems to identify motherhood with that idealized misconception and, because it rejects the image and its misuse,

feminism circumvents the real experience that fantasy overshadows.”¹⁷ In other words, feminism throws the baby out with the bathwater. Kristeva probes the history of the cult of the Virgin in order to understand how Christianity develops a “refined symbolic construct in which femininity . . . is focused on Maternity.” She defines the “maternal” as that “ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from the identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnameable that one imagines as femininity, non-language or body.”¹⁸ Here the Name, the Law of the Father, finds itself unavoidably destabilized by the pregnant or potentially pregnant body of the mother and the pre-linguistic state it presupposes, according to Kristeva.

In turn, Kristeva examines the history of the cult of the Virgin, mostly medieval, concluding that the function of the “Virginal Maternal” in the Western symbolic economy is one where the Virgin Mother occupies a territory that extends into the extra-linguistic regions of the unnameable, the territory of “milk and tears.” While Freud and Jung offer a “massive nothing” towards an understanding of maternal experience, Kristeva is able to argue that the Virginal Maternal nonetheless does succeed in several ways: it becomes one of the more successful ways of dealing with feminine paranoia, as it was able “to attract women’s wishes for identification as well as the very precise interposition of those who assumed to keep watch over the symbolic and social order.”¹⁹ Ultimately, however, it does not allow for an image of the mother as a “speaking social being.”²⁰

In the midst of all this history, theory, and philosophy concerning the Virgin, why put her own first-person experience as mother in parallel to the story of the Mother of God? What does it mean that Kristeva writes her soul and body into this text? In the first interpolation of the personal narrative, featured in figure 1, she expresses her struggle to write that which is within her, to articulate the experience of growing “a yet formless, unnameable embryo” (*d’un embryon encore informe, innomable*). She grasps at “words that are always too distant” (*mots toujours trop lointains*), and finds that to articulate the experience of conception and pregnancy, to write, is also to love: “what is loving, for a woman, the same thing as writing” (*Qu’est-ce aimer, pour une femme,*

la même chose qu'écrire). As she uses language to identify that extra-linguistic thing inside of her womb, she exclaims: WORD FLESH (VERBE FLESH). Both of these function as metaphors of the invisible: for the WORD, the invisible semiotic meaning; for the FLESH, the invisible flesh of the embryo. Kristeva at first seems to refer to the body of her unborn child when she writes, "Let a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words" (Qu'un corps s'aventure enfin hors de son abri, s'y risque en sens sous voile de mots). But as much as that embryo comes from her own flesh and blood, she is also talking about the emergence of her own subjectivity into this personalized text, out of the shelter of theory and criticism, to take a chance with meaning derived from discussion of her own body. It is her flesh that becomes word—the French *verbe* perilously close to the Latin *verbum*. She learns how to give voice to maternal experience by means of her own pregnancy.

Throughout "Stabat Mater" Kristeva is concerned, as she is in her broader work on linguistics and child development, with the relationship between reproduction and meaning, between womb and word, which is at the heart of her semiotic theory. But in this essay she approaches head-on the act of writing only at this moment, the moment of conception of her own pregnancy narrative. Once she gains momentum, moving on in the essay, this acute awareness of the intersection of the discourse of writing and the discourse of love—or motherhood—fades. Despite what she might define as the pre- or extra-linguistic nature of the little cells multiplying inside her, they drive her, or perhaps liberate her, to inscribe her own maternity in the form of a text. With this exclamation WORD FLESH she echoes the Christic Word made flesh, but she does not engage further with the ways in which the discourse of motherhood in Christianity returns, again and again, to not just language in general but its specific manifestations in reading and writing. Surprisingly, in this essay Kristeva never directly addresses the scene of the Annunciation and its rich language and iconography, which was so central to the spirituality of medieval visionary women like Birgitta of Sweden. Mary never reads—even Mary's voice in her conversation with the angel does not play a part. Perhaps here at this moment of authorial self-reflection, more than anywhere else in this piece, Kristeva misses out on the crucial

connection Mary offered to Birgitta: that for the Virgin and her cult, the maternal body is not reduced to silence; motherhood can give voice to the mother and enable authorhood.

Prior to any mention of milk or tears, Mary finds voice in the Scripture when she accepts the role of Mother of God: “May it be done according to your word” are the words Birgitta hears Mary repeat in her first revelation from the Mother of God. Mary’s speech echoes throughout Birgitta’s visions. Luke’s written account no longer limits the Virgin’s voice, and she freely elaborates for the saint a new narrative of authentic confession and inclusive love. By no means is Birgitta alone in hearing the unbridled voice of Mary fresh in the visionary medium: other medieval holy women, such as Margery Kempe, Elizabeth of Töss, and Julian of Norwich likewise envision a speaking Mother of God whose words shape her unique relationship to divinity.

The way Birgitta in particular conceptualizes Mary’s maternity as a vehicle for the female voice and a justification for textual production seems like an essential missing piece in both Kristeva’s autobiographical agenda and her theoretical analysis. In her 1998 letter exchange with Catherine Clément, published as *The Feminine and the Sacred*, Kristeva circles continually around the figure of Mary, at times jubilantly (“didn’t Mary make it possible for women to hold up their heads?”²¹), at times not:

You’ll grant me that I am not unaware of the traps that this sacré woman has set to snare our femininity for the last two thousand years: the body reduced to the ears and to tears; concealment of the sexuality I would not look at, under all the draping possible and imaginable by the best painters, and by the rest; sanctification of suffering and sorrow and, only afterward, the recognition of an incomparable power. Our queen of heaven may dominate the mystic depths, but she is rarely seen along the byways of power within the Church community.²²

For Kristeva the Virgin connives against “our femininity,” letting “the best painters” mask her body, shunning access to ecclesiastical or social power. Women seeking out Mary find an oppressive silence: “she bridles

them when she does not bully them: on your knees, ladies, you are only a place of transition, look after the children and the sick, no sex or politics, the ear and understanding are worth more than a sexed body, you can never be told often enough.”²³ To be sure, Kristeva’s summations of the Virgin’s message ring true in many circumstances, but are those not the ones most often constructed by men for women?²⁴ The Pauline decrees, the patristic formulations, the misogynistic doctrines dominate social discourse but do not eradicate an alternative narrative pronounced by many medieval holy women. Epitomized by Birgitta, the Virgin’s message as most often constructed by medieval holy women unbridles the female mouth; engages the holy woman in politics; endorses extended interpretation and critique over mere understanding; transforms the denigrated sexed (maternal) body into an exalted corpus of divine revelation. Much more than “only a place of transition,” the maternal body extends a prolonged engagement with the benefits of motherhood: for Mary in Birgitta’s revelation, her gestation of the Truth lends her a lasting power of discernment able to interrogate the wisest of scholars; for Birgitta herself, an irrefutable proof of the truth of her visionary encounter. Birgitta’s prior motherhood—exhibited eight times over—revisits her celibate body in order to demonstrate explicitly the validity of a sacred maternal that cannot be concealed by “all the draping possible and imaginable” and is in fact authenticated by the touch of her male confessors.

Like Birgitta’s expressive body, “Stabat Mater” itself is also “showing.” Typographically enveloped and yet displayed by the primary theoretical narrative, Kristeva’s inset personal narrative offers the impression of a text gestating within a text, of an embryo growing within a womb. It bulges from within the theoretical framework which nourishes it semantically and supports it visually. By the end of the essay the narratives are suspended in a moment of birthing, where the two columns end simultaneously, and the embryonic text emerges equal and distinct on the page. This is not, however, how the author intended her work. In a 1984 interview with Rosalind Coward shortly after *Histoires de l’amour* was published, Kristeva explains her logic behind the dual narrative in “Stabat Mater:”

I wanted to give an image of this contradiction which is, on the one hand, a description of the universal and the individual and, on the other hand, the involvement of the author. I tried to give an image of this in the chapter of *Histoires d'amour*, which is about maternal love and presented in two kinds of typeface: on the left you have a sort of literary poetic text and on the right, a more theoretical or academic discourse. And for me it's not a coherent text. I didn't want to give an impression of coherence, on the contrary I wanted to give an impression of a sort of wound, a scar.²⁵

Kristeva's understanding of her own text as a wound dramatically diverges from—and subsequently enriches—my reading of it as a womb. She says she did not intend her dual narratives to be coherent, and this would be entirely in keeping with the obsession with fragmentation marking the *Tel Quel* movement at this time and exemplified by typographically experimental texts such as Jacques Derrida's *Glas*.²⁶ Because of this drive towards disunity and the injured sense, Kristeva sets up her texts to “fail” each other: just as the Marian tradition cannot offer modern feminism any real solution, so her academic discourse cannot fulfill any needs of her personal discourse. Materiality, and material disruption, denies any totalizing philosophy—so the avant garde theorists would insist. I would argue that one reason why Kristeva's intended fragmentation could be seen to be redeemed by an alternate reading of typographical and semantic cohesion is the same reason why Christ's broken body is in fact a guarantee of wholeness.²⁷ Incarnational theory, rooted in the miraculous unity of God and man in Mary's womb at the Annunciation, insists that materiality, especially textual materiality, can be an agent for coherence and redemption just as the Son had to be the Word made flesh and broken in order rise again and offer the wholeness of salvation to mankind. Kristeva's reference to the disruptive wound finds a startling inversion in the medieval construction of the wound in Christ's side as Julian of Norwich describes it in her *Revelation of Love*: the wound expands into a womb, as it is a “fair delectable place, and large inow for alle mankinde that shalle be saved to rest in pees and in love.”²⁸ In medieval devotional discourse the blood of the Son's wound nurtures

just like the milk from the Mother's breast.²⁹ The wound stays open in order to heal.

If we return to Kristeva's image of this contradiction of theoretical description and authorial involvement, we can also imagine this as the juxtaposition of Birgitta's public text of the vision and the private text of her body: two narratives, one divine, one human, yet intertwined, inextricably linked through maternity. For Birgitta the coherence of the two is unquestionable. In terms of her career, the "spiritual pregnancy" episode became central to Birgitta's validation as a prophet. Birgitta's textual publication comes about because her visionary experience cannot be held within her spirit or soul but extends into the body, into a corporal publication in the form of a mystical pregnancy that announces to all the world the special ability of woman to speak the divine. Not only does the physical movement "show" itself to Birgitta and her priests and confessors, Mary's interpretation of it verifies the authenticity of the saint's prophetic voice—the vocal part of her vocation—and Mary demands that the revelations be "shown" beyond the immediate presence of her physical body by means of a disseminated text.

What makes the medieval use of Mary's role in the Annunciation and Incarnation so useful in the construction of a transhistorical, functional discourse of motherhood is its effective conflation of the dual definitions of *conception*, originating human life in the womb and originating an idea or notion in the mind. With the act of gestation comes an act of interpretation: an act of authorship. Searching the past for a vision of the future, the literate woman today still desires a model of the mother-author. Without showing any awareness of this medieval precedent, Kristeva fully understands the importance of its impact:

What if the ancestral division between "those who give life" (women) and "those who give meaning" (men) were in the process of disappearing? . . . It would be a radical upheaval, never before seen. . . . After two thousand years of world history dominated by the sacredness of the Baby Jesus, might women be in a position to give a different coloration to the ultimate sacred, the miracle of human life: not life for itself, but life bearing meaning, for the

formulation of which women are called upon to offer their desire and their words?³⁰

This is the vision Birgitta saw. Her version was not a radical social upheaval, but a practical spiritual upheaval, premised upon the righteousness of the female voice under the authority of God—and shared with the Mother of God, whose voice resonates independently of “the sacredness of the Baby Jesus.” Within this view I do not mean to imply that Birgitta challenges the supreme power given to God and Christ by the patriarchal system which formed, maintained, and continues to define orthodox Catholicism. Even for Mary, her initial maternity relied upon Christ’s presence in her womb, and her unique state as Virgin Mother reflects centuries of misogynistic theology. As Birgitta’s example has demonstrated, however, the aftereffects of that unique maternity can be appropriated and reinterpreted by a woman without Christ’s direct involvement and in a way which ignores or challenges that misogynistic theology. Through WORD and FLESH, the literate mother can help rehabilitate her female status as a “speaking social being.”

In bringing together this single essay of Kristeva’s—paradoxically, perhaps, her most well known but least representative piece of writing concerned with feminism—with a single scene from the rich tradition of medieval holy women’s visionary literature, I do not intend to impugn Kristeva for her ignorance of that tradition. It was, after all, by and large outside the purview of her critical agenda; as Janet Todd explains about the theoretical movement of which Kristeva was a part at this time,

[F]rench critics . . . had little interest in past female writing which they regarded as deeply embedded within patriarchal cultural and linguistic structures. They were largely uninterested in describing a few markers of how women wrote in distinction to men at a particular unenlightened time in history.³¹

That agenda of retrieval and recuperation, rather, belongs to the Anglo-American school of feminist criticism, spearheaded in the 1970s by critics such as Ellen Moers (*Literary Women*, 1976) and Elaine Showalter (*A*

Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing, 1977). Yet their explorations of women's writing barely reach back past the eighteenth century. In the thirty-five years or so since "Stabat Mater" was first published as "Hérétique de l'amour," medieval scholars have labored to bridge this yawning gap between the variegated field of feminist criticism and medieval studies, often by engaging modern feminist literary theory as a productive lens through which to analyze medieval texts. With this essay I make a parallel critical gesture in a complementary direction: to show how medieval women's writing might challenge, and force fresh considerations of, the work of modern feminist critics such as Kristeva. In this I echo the aspirations of Judith Bennett, who in her cornerstone article "Medievalism and Feminism," asks and answers the question, "Where will feminist scholarship lead medieval studies in the twenty-first century?"³²

Certainly, feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages will continue to transform medieval studies itself, helping to create a fuller and more nuanced understanding of medieval life and culture. Yet it is also my hope that we will help to direct medieval studies back to the present, back to critical engagement not only with contemporary issues and audiences but also with our nonmedievalist colleagues.

Medieval holy women's literature offers perhaps the deepest, freshest source of exhilarating material with which to feed this critical engagement bridging periods and disciplines. Birgitta and other medieval female visionaries stand to make many important contributions to modern feminist discourse, especially concerning theology and Marian studies: for instance, as this essay sets out to prove, that the figure of the Virgin can offer not a silence of "milk and tears" but a voice of authorship enabled by the maternal body. Kristeva's work points out a potential lacuna in the modern feminist understanding of Mary, one that can be filled by reaching back to the Middle Ages to find the holy women who created innovative, often unorthodox, means of accessing the divine and developing an authorial voice.³³ While it may be unproductive (and anachronistic) to try to apply the label of "feminist" to a medieval female author like Birgitta, it is undoubtedly productive to explore how her text might problematize and enrich our notions of

what it means to be a feminist, a mother, an author, a Christian—both in the present and in the past.

Birgitta's *Revelationes* reached thousands of women readers throughout the late medieval and early modern periods, heavily influencing the way that female authority and spiritual activity came to be regarded by European society and the Catholic Church. Her writings continue to be read today while her Order claims hundreds of sisters around the world. It seems safe to conclude that if Birgitta had not found in the Virgin Mary a satisfying discourse on motherhood, she would not have found the cultural space to bring her visions into the world, to give birth to a book.

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END NOTES

1. This article has benefitted greatly from the feedback of the Yale University Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program Graduate Student Colloquium (October 2009); the Round Table, a Yale University / University of Connecticut Medieval Studies Dissertation Working Group (November 2009); and the Nordic Center for Medieval Studies Summer Course, Bergen, Norway (August 2010). My particular thanks also go to Ian Cornelius and Liz Appel for their constructive insights.

2. Preface to "Stabat Mater," in Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 160.

3. For biography on Birgitta, see Bridget Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999); Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 13-33.

4. Yvonne Bruce makes a similar move involving Birgitta and Luce Irigaray in "I am the Creator: Birgitta of Sweden's Feminine Divine," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 32 (2001): 19-40. Other medieval scholars engaging modern feminist theory in exhilarating and productive ways include Liz Herbert McAvoy, Amy Hollywood, Karma Lochrie, Laurie Finke, and Carolyn Dinshaw, among others.

5. Most recently, Kristeva's monumental (700-page) book on the sixteenth-century mystic Saint Theresa of Ávila, *Thérèse mon amour* (Paris: Fayard, 2008). Likewise, her interest in the Middle Ages was undoubtedly cultivated by the medievalist Georges Bataille's influence on the *Tel Quel*

circle and French intellectual cultures in which Kristeva, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu worked; on Kristeva's premodern inclinations see Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1-3, 89-90, 154-57, 177-80.

6. Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 96.

7. All references to the *Revelationes* are identified by book, chapter, and verse. This translation is from *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, intro. and notes by Bridget Morris, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); the Latin is from *Sancta Birgitta: Revelaciones Book III*, ed. Ann-Mari Jönsson (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1998). "Et ex huius caritatis ferore misit nuncium suum ad me faciens me voluntatem suam intelligere, ut videlicet fierem mater Dei. Quod dum noui esse voluntatis diuine, statim ex igne caritatis, quam in corde ad Deum habui, per os meum exhibat vere obediencie verbum, per quod nuncio sic respondi: 'Fiat', inquires, 'michi secundum verbum tuum.' Et in eodum puncto verbum factum est caro in me, et Dei filius factus est filius meus, et sic ambo habebamus unum filium, qui utrumque est, scilicet Deus et homo, et ego similiter mater atque virgo. Cumque hic filius meus, qui est vir sapientissimus et Deus verus Ihesus Christus, iaceret in utero meo, tantam ab ipso adepta sum sapienciam, verum eciam in cordibus eorum cerno, utrum verba ipsorum ex diuina caritate aut ex solius litterature astucia procedunt. . . . Ego sum, que veritatem de ore Gabrielis audiui et indubitanter credidi, unde et veritas de meo corpore sibi carnem sumpsit et sanguinem et mansit in me. Illam eandem veritatem ego genui de me, qui utrumque, scilicet Deus et homo, est ex se. Et quia veritas, que Dei filius est, ad me venire et in me habitare ex meque nasci voluit, ideo plenissime intelligo, utrum in ore hominum sit veritas an non."

8. The origin of the motif of Mary reading ultimately lies in the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* and *Gospel of pseudo-Matthew*, two apocryphal Gospels which identify her as "learned in the wisdom of God" as a virgin growing up in the temple. In the fifth century, Ambrose describes her as "studious in reading" with books as companions. By the time Gabriel arrived, she had already read Isaiah's prophecy. Not until the ninth century did Mary appear holding a book during her conversation with Gabriel: the Brunswick Casket, a later Metz school ivory carving (ca. 860-70), is the first extant artistic representation. In his vernacular versification of the Gospels (ca. 863), called the *Evangelienbuch*, Otfrid von Weissenburg also describes her reading the

psalter at that moment. By the eleventh- and twelfth-century rise of the cult of the Virgin, the motif of Mary reading at the Annunciation was firmly established throughout Europe. For a general overview of Annunciation iconography see Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1966), 33-55; André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); on the motif of the book, see Otto Pächt, C. R. Dodwell, and Francis Wormald, eds., *The St. Alban's Psalter* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1960), 63-67, as well as Klaus Schreiner's two articles, "Marienverehrung, Lesekultur, Schriftlichkeit: Bildungs- und frömmigkeitgeschichtliche Studien zur Auslegung und Darstellung von 'Mariä Verkündigung,'" in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien: Jahrbuch des Instituts für Frühmittelalterforschung des Universität Münster* 24, ed. Hagen Keller and Joachim Wollasch (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990): 314-68, and ". . . wie Maria gleicht einem puch': Beiträge zur Buchmetaphorik des hohen und späten Mittelalters," *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 11 (1971): cols. 1437-64.

9. Homily IV, *De laudibus virginis matris. Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 183, cols. 82-85. My translation.

10. My translation, based on that of Yvonne Bruce, from "I am the Creator': Birgitta of Sweden's Feminine Divine," 39; Latin from *Sancta Birgitta: Revelaciones, Book VI*, ed. Birger Bergh, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet, Latinska Skrifter Band 7:6 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991). "Nocte natalis Domini tam mirabilis et magna aduenit sponse Christi exultacio cordis, vt vix se pre leticia tenere posset, et in eodem momento sensit in corde motum sensibilem admirabilem, quasi si in corde esset puer viuus et voluens se et reuoluens. Cumque motus iste duraret, ostendit patri spirituali suo et aliquibus amicis spiritualibus suis, ne forte esset illusio. Qui visu et tactu probantes veritatem admirabantur. Itaque iterum eodem die in summa missa apparuit mater Dei et dixit sponse: 'Filia, miraris de motu, quem sentis in corde tuo. Scias, quod non est illusio sed ostensio quedam similitudinis dulcedinis mee et misericordie michi facte. Nam sicut tu ignoras, quomodo tam subito tibi cordis exultacio et motus aduenit, sic aduentus filii mei in me mirabilis fuit et festinus. Nam quando ego consensi angelo nuncianti michi conceptionem filii Dei, statim sensi in me mirabile quoddam et viuudum. Et cum nasceretur ex me, indicibili exultacione et mirabili festinancia clauso meo virginali vtero prodiebat. Ideo, filia, non timeas illusionem sed gratulare, quia motus iste, quem tu sentis, signum aduentus filii mei est in cor tuum. Ideo, sicut

filius meus imposuit tibi nomen noue sponse sue, sic ego voco te nunc nurum filii mei. [. . .] indicare volumus amicis nostris et mundo per te voluntatem nostram. Motus vero iste cordis tui perseuerabit tecum et augebitur iuxta capacitatem cordis tui.”

11. On the conceptual conflation of womb and heart in medieval religious literature, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. 158-161; Jacqueline E. Jung, “Chrystalline Wombs and Pregnant Hearts: The Exuberant Bodies of the Katherinenthal Visitation Group,” in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. Bruce Holsinger and Rachel Fulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 223-37; esp. 227-28; and Margaret Bridges, “‘Ubi est thesaurus tuus, ibi est cor tuum’: Towards a History of the Displaced Heart in Medieval English,” in *The Heart*, ed. Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *Micrologus* 11 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 501-18.

12. On other examples of medieval priests, nuns, and holy women experiencing “maternal encounters with the infant Jesus,” see Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 86-88; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), esp. 256-58; and Rosemary Drage Hale, “Imitatio Mariae: Motherhood Motifs in Late Medieval German Spirituality,” in *Medieval German Literature: Proceedings from the 23rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 5-8, 1988*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1989), 129-45.

13. See Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 78-107; Bruce, “‘I am the Creator,’” esp. 38-40; Kari Elisabeth Børresen, “Birgitta’s Godlanguage: Exemplary Intention, Inapplicable Content,” in *Birgitta, hendes værk og hendes klostre i Norden*, ed. Tore Nyberg (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1991), 21-71, esp. 38-39; and Joan Bechtold, “St. Birgitta: The Disjunction Between Women and Ecclesiastical Male Power,” in *Equally in God’s Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Julia Bolton Holloway et. al. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1990), 88-102.

14. Sahlin, *The Voice of Prophecy*, 84.

15. Ibid.

16. For a critical overview of Kristeva’s work on motherhood and feminism, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 78-99.

17. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," as translated in Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, 169. All following English quotations from "Stabat Mater" will be drawn from *The Kristeva Reader*, while the original French is from Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Édition Denoël, 1983), 225-47. "Or, lorsque le féminisme revendique une nouvelle représentation de la féminité, il semble identifier la maternité avec cette méprise idéalisée et, parce qu'il refuse l'image et ses abus, le féminisme contourne l'expérience réelle que ce fantasme occulte" (225).

18. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 161-62. "Le christianisme est sans doute la construction symbolique la plus raffinée dans laquelle la féminité . . . se réserve dans le *Maternel*. Appelons 'maternel' le principe ambivalent qui tient, d'une part, de l'espèce, de l'autre—d'une catastrophe d'identité qui fait basculer le Nom propre dans cet innommable qu'on imagine comme de la féminité, du non-langage ou du corps" (225-26).

19. Ibid., 179-80. "Freud propose plutôt un *rien* massif"; "Qu'est-ce que qui donc, dans cette figure maternelle qui . . . a pue attirer les désirs d'identification des femmes aussi bien que les interventions bien précises de ceux qui se chargeaient de veiller sur l'ordre symbolique et social?" (242-43).

20. As Kelly Oliver points out in her discussion of *Tales of Love* in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 297.

21. Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 43. French from *Le féminin et le sacré* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1988). ". . . la Vierge Marie. . . N'a-t-elle pas permis aux femmes de relever la tête?" (71).

22. Ibid., 73. "Tu m'accorderas que je n'ignore pas les pièges tendus par cette sacrée femme à notre féminité depuis deux mille ans : le corps réduit à l'oreille et aux larmes; cachez-moi cette sexualité que je ne saurais voir, sous tous les drapés possibles et imaginables des meilleurs peintres et des autres; sanctification de la souffrance et de la douleur, et après cela seulement reconnaissance d'un pouvoir inégalé: notre Reine des cieux domine peut-être les abîmes mystiques mais on ne la voit guère dans les allées du pouvoir ecclésial" (120).

23. Ibid., 79. "elle les bride quant elle ne les brime pas : à genoux, mesdames, vous n'êtes qu'un lieu de passage, prenez soin des enfants et des malades, ni sexe ni politique, l'oreille et l'entendement valent mieux qu'un corps sexué, on ne vous le dira jamais assez" (129).

24. Other critics have likewise taken issue with Kristeva's approach to women's experience of maternity in "Stabat Mater" and "The Mother

According to Bellini.” According to Ann Rosalind Jones, “Kristeva still believes that men create the world of power and representation; women create babies. . . . Kristeva’s literary studies likewise reveal her lack of interest in women as agents in culture rather than as objects of men’s cultural representation. She reproduces the omission of women from the literary canon by omitting them from detailed consideration in her own analyses and by judging them according to a single, masculine standard of value. Typically, she is contemptuous of women’s writing”; see Jones, “Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of Semiotic Politics,” *Feminist Review* 10 (1984), 56-73; 63.

25. “Julia Kristeva in Conversation with Rosalind Coward,” *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Oliver, 339; see also Oliver’s discussion of *Tales of Love*, 296-98.

26. On typography and *Tel Quel*, see Patrick French, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel (1960-1983)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 64-67. In their introduction to *The Tel Quel Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), Patrick French and Roland-François Lack write, “*Tel Quel* is at one and the same time a journal of . . . theory and of creative writing” and that “the radical textual practices of Sollers, Playnet, and Roche are an intrinsic part of *Tel Quel*’s theoretical project” (4-6). See also Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1974), and in English, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1986).

27. As Caroline Walker Bynum explains: “The eucharistic host, fragmented by human teeth and digestive processes yet in every minute crumb the whole body of Christ is . . . the guarantee that wholeness—non-partibility and non-passibility—is God’s ultimate promise to humankind.” *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 12.

28. *A Revelation of Love*, chap. 24, lines 3-4; *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 201.

29. See Caroline Walker Bynum’s work on the wound of Christ in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 271-72, and *Wonderful Blood*, 133-68.

30. Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 14; the translator’s additions of “women” and “men” compensate for loss in English of the gendered pronouns of the French. “Et si le partage ancestral entre « celles qui donnent la vie » et « ceux qui donnent le sens » était en train de disparaître? . . . Ce serait un bouleversement radical, du jamais vu. . . . Après deux mille ans d’histoire mondiale dominée par ce sacré qu’est l’Enfant Jésus, les femmes ne seraient-elles pas en position de donner une autre coloration à

ce sacré ultime qu'est le miracle de la vie humaine : non pas de la vie pour elle-même, mais de la vie porteuse de sens, à la formulation duquel les femmes sont appelées à apporter leur désir et leur parole?" (27). Elsewhere Kristeva calls for a related discursive revolution: "What is needed in the West today is a reevaluation of the 'maternal function,' seeing it not as explosive and repressed but as a source of practices considered to be marginal (such as "aesthetic" practices) and a source of innovation." See "une femmes': The Woman Effect" (Interview with Elaine Boucquey, 1975), in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 103-12; 108.

31. Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 54.

32. Judith Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," *Speculum* 68 (1993), 309-31; 325.

33. For instance, in the volume *Feminism and Theology*, ed. by Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, Oxford Readings in Feminism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Mary receives barely any consideration; Janet Martin Soskice, "Blood and Defilement," briefly considers Kristeva's psychoanalytic/philosophical reading of the Creation and its positioning of the Other as both maternal and paternal, but only as an opening to the idea of the crucified Christ's body being symbolically identified with the human female body, both in giving birth and in feeding; Mary's maternity never comes up for discussion (333-43; 333-34).